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**‘And not destroyed by the destruction of the body’: Documenting Incarceration:
Joya Mitra’s *Killing Days***

By Tutun Mukherjee¹

Abstract

This paper discusses an unusual and disturbing narrative of a young student who is incarcerated for four years in Indian jails for participating in an ideological battle with a state government that steadily escalated in violence and brought students like her in direct confrontation with the state machinery. In prison, she is categorized as a ‘political detainee’ and must await her trial which is not allowed to happen until the political dispensation changes. *Killing Days* is a prison memoir—not of Mitra alone but of all the women she meets and shares pain and anguish with through the period of her imprisonment. Mitra realizes that the women lodged in the prisons are more victims of exploitation and oppression than perpetrators of crime. Most of them are poor, illiterate and friendless women who have no where to go, no one to care for them and no access to the law. *Killing Days* narrates the stories of such inmates of prisons and describes the horrifying conditions of institutionalization, brutalization and exploitation that prevail in the prisons and their adjunct asylums and hospitals. Even after her release Mitra remains a prisoner of her traumatic memories. The narratives of those anonymous women of the female wards who are waiting forever for legal help must be set free before Mitra finds freedom herself.

Keywords: political detainee, incarceration, female wards

Introduction

My titular quote from the *Geeta* represents the spirit which permeates Joya Mitra’s prison memoir *Killing Days* (2004) and had inspired its Bengali title, *Hanyaman* (1990)². The award winning narrative is a lucid, intensely moving and highly personal account of Mitra’s four-year incarceration [1970-74] in the prisons of West Bengal, India, during the fiery decade of the seventies when the entire state was consumed by social-political violence.

The 1970s remains an unforgotten decade in Bengal’s memory, as poignant and historic as the 1960s political and Civil Rights turmoil in the U.S.A. Nothing could be more tragic than the total break that happened in the communication between the people and a popularly elected government of a democratic nation, a situation that bred mutual suspicion and distrust. It took a decade, many lives and a change in the political dispensation before a semblance of order could return to the state.

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² The Bengali title is *Hanyaman*, a difficult word to translate. It comes closest to what the translator suggests as ‘in the process of being destroyed.’ The *Gita* says ‘*Na hanyatey, hanyamaney sharirey*’ (the body can be slain, but the soul is indestructible). The challenging text is ably translated by Shampa Banerjee. I read the text in the original Bengali. I use the English translation for discussion for obvious reasons.

This paper discusses Mitra's intense and disturbing narrative that records such situations of life when the demarcations between the private and the public spheres of life are effaced. Instantiating the persuasive slogan of the second wave of feminism 'the personal is political,' the author's experiences in *Killing Days* stress the way private feelings and even basic existence can be cruelly circumscribed, imposed upon, molded and defined by political and social forces. Therefore, according to Mitra, to accept that personal is always political is to be realistic.³

A Prisoner's Narrative

In the early years of the 1970s, the anti-Establishment agitation which began in Bengal in support of farmers rights, transfigured quickly as a trans-social reactionary movement expressing the frustration of the educated unemployed, the discontentment of the middleclass forced to suffer acute privations, and the anger of the people in general from all sections of the society at the apathetic government rendered ineffective by systemic corruption. The steadily escalating violence sucked into its vortex an entire generation of idealistic and ideological young people who envisioned a radical socio-political change and were ready to martyr themselves for its attainment. Pushed to the wall, the government retaliated with tyrannical and punitive measures, often in the guise of 'police encounters with alleged criminals'. Using repressive measures like those of a desperate colonial regime, the police force of a democratic nation did not hesitate to pull young people out of colleges, clubs, restaurants and homes on grounds of suspicion and take them away supposedly for 'interrogation'. Many of those young persons were never heard of again.⁴ Mitra writes in the Preface:

This is the way it always happens: the waves soar and tumble,
the deluge rushes in and recedes. The river keeps flowing...
The decade of the 1970s came in a tidal wave and swept away
from the minds of the common people all unfamiliarity,
fear, ignorance about prisons. It was a deluge that broke
all barriers. (vii)

Mitra was barely eighteen, a college student full of courage and idealism, when she joined the agitating student groups as a political and social justice activist. During a 'police encounter', Mitra suffered serious spinal injury and was eventually arrested along with several of her agitating companions. She found herself in a jail soon after.

Reminiscent of Hemingway's novel of the First World War *A Farewell to Arms*, Mitra's narrative begins with her regaining sporadic consciousness as she is being carried out of a gate in a stretcher. She is dumped unceremoniously on the floor of a vehicle, at the booted feet of those sitting on the benches on either side (2). The vehicle which she

³ First used by Carol Hanisch in 1969. The idea that every part of one's life could be affected by political situation was the one of the most insightful philosophies of the 1960s and the 70s. More recently some have argued that the slogan gave Feminism a bad name and caused feminists to focus on wrong issues. The debate continues.

⁴ There exists a large body of writing on the traumatic events of the 1970s. Poignant texts on the disappearance, incarceration and death of the young agitators are: Mahasweta Devi's *The Mother of 1084* and Bani Basu's *The Enemy Within*.

later realizes is an army truck, starts to move and she is tossed around, hurting with every jolt of the truck and 'losing consciousness and coming back to life again' (3). After an interminable and an excruciatingly painful journey through the night, the truck finally stops. The arrival of dawn has lightened up the sky. Mitra struggles out of her pain-induced haze and reads the white letters that hang upon the gate where the truck had stopped: Midnapore Central Jail. She is dragged out of the vehicle 'like a grain of sack' and carried inside. Locks open noisily and she is dumped in a cold, dark and dingy room. She hears a man's voice say 'Write down! 21/9, first transfer of the day' and suddenly she remembers that 'it's my birthday, the beginning of my 21st year' (4).

Thus begins her period of imprisonment after desultory trips to the court in closed vans with other under-trial prisoners [i.e. not charged guilty but awaiting the hearing of their cases in the designated courts of law]; and thus begins her first person recollection of the experiences and the people she meets during the four years of her incarceration. 'This is not nostalgia,' she writes. 'It's more like turning the pages of an album. In the folds of the long, dark days of four years, appear a multitude of faces. I look at them, over and over, the sparkling stars on a black, moonless night. I brush the dust off them where they live in my heart. I try to bring them out of there, to tell people about an outlandish world, that stands cheek by jowl with the town, the marketplace. A brick wall just eleven feet high separates the real world from the unreal...' (4-5). *Killing Days* is a remarkable text for several reasons. Though not written during Mitra's incarceration since there was no way for her to procure writing materials in prison, it constitutes a vivid recollection of those traumatic years after her release from prison. It is autobiographical, certainly, but of a kind that transgresses the generic boundary by documenting not one but many lives braided tightly together and mirroring each other in such a manner that the understanding of one life is contingent upon understanding the life-stories of several others. Though her own story remains the central one, her memories are interwoven with the stories of the many people she has interacted with during her years in prison, especially the pain-filled stories of the fellow prisoners in the female wards of the various prisons where she was lodged. The subtitle of the book as 'Prison Memoirs' (and **not** 'My' Prison Memoirs), stresses the collective nature of the entire cluster of the writer's memories.

It is a rare prison narrative in a country like India because it is written by a woman prisoner and focuses on issues and conditions that are gender specific. It is a rare document because the voices of the female inmates incarcerated in the prisons and asylums of India are still not heard. Mitra shares the stories of the women she meets during her stay in several prisons and describes the mental and physical cruelties imposed upon them by the existing prison system. *Killing Days* is a valuable record of the conditions of institutionalization [of a prison or an asylum; the latter is very often a part of a prison and is referred to as 'the madhouse'] by a sensitive and an educated person who is critically aware of both human rights and citizens' rights and about their violation, especially because she herself is not a 'criminal' but is categorized as a 'political detainee'.

The narrative technique of *Killing Days* is not a simple and straightforward reportage of experiences but is complex and novel-like. Events and character-sketches are not arranged chronologically but are often interrupted by tangential narrative lines, flashbacks or memories, and/or contemplation about the current situation. The excavation of memory in the narrative is not so much a matter of catharsis as meant to bring back the

moment of rupture in the consciousness, a moment that the traumatized generally do not know how to remember. There are often comments or expression of feelings about a certain episode or incident. Moreover, running parallel to the many histories that Mitra weaves into her narrative are transversal dialogues concerning the politics of gender; social rights, social difference and social responsibilities; may be even the modern aporias of citizenship. Mitra has been conscious of her reader all along and her deliberate narrative strategy is to draw the reader into the dialectics concerning human and civil rights. The tone is ostensibly rational and practical but the creative writer's sensitivity to the conditions of human bondage enhances the poignant appeal of the subject. What also becomes apparent is the narrator's desire to maintain her individual selfhood, yet relate this self to the community of oppressed women and their collective suffering that she is a witness to. The narrative makes an effort to move towards defining a collective identity of womanhood for whom the experiences of domination, subjugation and exploitation within patriarchy are common.

The Female Wards

The sentence of imprisonment exists in all modern systems of criminal law sanctions and the process of execution of the sentence constitutes its crucial phase. One of the primary criteria in the execution of the penalty sentence is the locking up of the prisoners in special institutions with detailed rules of conduct, especially the denial of liberty and enforced isolation and segregation. These rules are made to be essentially different from the normal ways of life led in a social community and are intended to create an artificial and unnatural living environment. Hence, such rules are not conducive to a healthy psycho-somatic impact. After a certain period of time, the breach in social communication and the lack of contact with the life beyond the prison walls can invariably lead to serious psychic, emotional, intellectual and physiological problems in the prisoners.

While the topic of crime in general has drawn the attention of researchers in India⁵, somehow the subject of female criminality has attracted less research interest, perhaps because unlike male criminality, it has not been taken as a significant social problem.⁶ Female offences may be better understood in the context of the role of women in a patriarchal society like India that is determined by their constitutional, physiological, psychological differences as well as by their gendered positionality – all of which appear to be inter-related. Theorists generally conclude that most of the female crimes are 'the result of human nature (adjustments), needs (biological, economic and social), and situation (environment) which lead to "unnatural" behaviour' (Nagla, 46). According to D. Klein, women turn to crime as 'a perversion or rebellion against their natural feminine roles' (72). Mitra mentions that generally the prisoners are listed as 'petty case,' 'love case' and so on, though there are also some serious 'cases' like murder listed. But it has been acknowledged, and corroborated by Mitra's narrative, that very often the women are

⁵ Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* discusses the history and the societal views about prison and the way the system of prisons/punishment/rehabilitation has changed over the centuries to arrive at the 'modern' prison system.

⁶ According to B.K. Nagla (34-35), at least three reasons might immediately be found for the lack of work on female criminality: a) female criminals are less in number; b) women crime is assumed to be less serious; c) preponderance of male theorists in the field. Moreover, whatever little work has been done suffers very often from bias and stereotypes about women.

merely the victims of circumstances and of crimes perpetrated against them (Chapman and Gates; Ahuja; Atray) and hence may be understood to have been goaded into violence.

In the matter of criminal jurisprudence, evidence suggests that the sex roles and the position of women have not undergone significant change in the Indian society to bring about noteworthy difference in the trend and type of female crimes [perhaps a feature shared with other Third World countries].⁷ Nevertheless, at least for the sake of keeping pace with the changes in the global perception of 'discipline and punishment', the correctional policies for female offenders languishing in the Indian prisons merit greater attention and possible re-formulation. As R.K. Raghavan, a journalist, stresses in his report titled 'The hell that is prison' (2004), 'If prisons are to become humane and reformatory, their management needs basic reforms.' Modern prison reforms mandate that instead of being punitive, the correctional measures should be reformatory to ensure rehabilitation and re-integration of the inmates into the society after the completion of their prison sentences.⁸ A large number of offenders sent to prisons do not require any therapeutically correctional treatment. They are as normal as the citizens outside the prison walls are and, actually, need to be protected from the harmful effects of exposure to prison life.

According to Mitra, the existing system of prison administration and the general indifference and even negligence of the government [the administration of prisons falls under the jurisdiction of the state governments] to take cognizance of such matters only serve to breed parasites who feed on the corrupt system of the official hierarchy for easy livelihood. She explains,

There are criminals who have stayed on for four years... convicted of minor fraud. They earn enough sitting in the prison to oil the wheel of justice so that their files are kept buried and their case not tried in court for as long as possible. ...These creatures still called human beings ...are the rootless, ugly embodiments of the worst possible greed and selfishness in this society. They are also the nuts and bolts that are necessary to keep the prison wheels running. (89)

⁷ This does not suggest that there has been no advancement/gain at all in the women's position in India in other walks of life. However, gender stereotyping and its consequential effects have not completely disappeared.

⁸ Modern prison reform in India is said to emanate from the Indian Jails Committee of 1919-20, which identified reformation and rehabilitation as the true objective of prison administration. The Committee recommended that the care of criminals should be entrusted to adequately trained staff selected after careful scrutiny. It rejected the idea of excessive employment of convict overseers and urged for the induction of technical staff in jail services. It also advised separate jails for different types of prisoners, prescribing a minimum area of 75 square yards per inmate. It strongly objected to the presence of children in jails meant for adults.

The 1980-83 report of the All India Committee on Jail Reforms chaired by Mr. Justice A N Mulla observed that 'prison administration in India has been...a subject of criticism in the Press, the Parliament and the Judiciary....Over-crowded prisons, prolonged detention of under-trial prisoners, unsatisfactory living conditions, lack of treatment programs and allegations of an indifferent and even inhuman approach of prison staff have repeatedly attracted the attention of critics over the years.' Unfortunately, no worthwhile reforms affecting basic issues seem to be in place.

The systemic malfunction is obvious by the manner in which such prisoners are able to live more comfortably within the prison than outside it by colluding with the corrupt officials to run cartels of various kinds. Such type of people exists in every jail. Mitra describes the shock and revulsion on her acquaintance with one such group. She meets Shikha and writes,

Shikha was the perfect example of the way the jail functioned. She was an under-trial prisoner for about a dozen cases of willful deceit. It was as if her entire appearance was a reflection of everything that was sinful in urban society. She has two assistants, Saraju and Lalmoti, who had been madams in their own brothels... (74-5).

It is with the help of such dregs of the human society flourishing within the prison that, Mitra discovers, the authorities manage to run their show with minimal trouble. Resistance of any sort is promptly and cruelly suppressed and there is hardly any way that the information from within the prison can cross the high stone walls to draw public attention to all the atrocities being committed. To be in prison is terrible no doubt, but as endorsed by Mitra's own experiences, to be placed in the female wards of the Indian jails is hell indeed.⁹

In the context of the general conditions of imprisonment, however, which still prevail in the country, to Mitra the Midnapore Jail 'seems like a wonderful place' (8). Mitra explains that the environment is not entirely cheerless and sordid, because unlike the Presidency or the Pondicherry jails, here the prisoners are kept in wards and not in isolated cells.¹⁰ Eight to ten female prisoners share a room. But the total lack of privacy is compensated by the homeliness of having people to talk with. The prisoners are also permitted to keep their small children with them in the female ward, whose presence introduces both distraction and a good amount of cheer. Moreover, the large contingent of tribal Santhal girls who are imprisoned primarily for 'stealing' coal from railway yards lighten the atmosphere with their laughter and singing. These features, along with the

⁹ The National Police Commission (1977-80) looked into issues like arrest, detention in custody, interrogation of women, and delay in investigation (which led to undue detention of non-convicted persons). Besides highlighting the need to adhere to the provisions of law, it made wide ranging suggestions to amend laws and procedures to minimize delays at the investigation and trial stages, and avoid custodial violence and lock-up illegalities. The report of the National Commission for Women [drawing upon the findings of the Krishna Iyer Committee] on 'Custodial Justice for Women' (1993) suggests the following procedures to be maintained for women prisoners: Women prisoners – like men – should be informed of their rights under the law

1. Women constables should conduct searches.
2. Medical check-ups of women and under-trial prisoners should be done by women doctors as soon as they come to prison.
3. Women prisoners should be allowed to contact their families and communicate with their lawyers, women social workers, and voluntary organizations.
4. Women prisoners should be allowed to keep their children with them.
5. Voluntary organizations of women should be encouraged to be associated with women prisoners.
6. Separate jails should be provided for women.
7. Special prosecution officers should be available to present the case of women prisoners.

¹⁰ Midnapore Jail is a suburban jail; Presidency Jail is in Kolkata, the erstwhile Presidency town during British colonialism; Pondicherry Jail, located in a region which used to be a French colony, very often housed political prisoners incarcerated for insurrection.

comparatively lax attitude of the jail officials and the availability of plenty of trees and bushes in the inner courtyard, render the female ward of the Midnapore Jail a rural atmosphere. Gradually, Mitra is able to establish a rapport with the other inmates and gets to know their tragic stories of deprivation and exploitation, helplessness and rejection.

The stories are not untypical of the oppression that women generally, and the poor and illiterate women especially, suffer in India. Many find themselves in jail because they have no where else to go. There is, for instance, T. Jayalakshmi the daughter of a penniless Brahmin priest who was married to a lowly paid labourer at the Kalaikunda airbase. After the familiar story of daily humiliation for bringing no dowry, followed by childbirth, exhaustion, oppression, Jayalakshmi is deserted by her husband within two years of her marriage. On the way to Kalaikunda in search of him, she is raped and abandoned by the wayside. She is taken to the police station and from there to the Midnapore jail. Similar is the story of the doll-like Ganga, humiliated and whipped senseless by her philandering husband. There are other poor and dejected women like Maya, Itoari, Haneefa, Khandi boudi and so on whose stories of victimization and oppression are uncannily similar as is their helplessness in seeking legal redress.¹¹

According to Mitra, one of the most pronounced and overlooked element of prison life is the boredom. Through the everyday routine and the monotony of the convict existence deprived of all choices, reading can very often become a valuable mode to preserve and maintain mental and intellectual agility. It secures connections with the outside world and it is a way of nourishing the sensibility of woman's nature in rigid prison rules encirclement. But this 'luxury' is available only to the literate prisoners. Mitra realizes that the only way to retain her mental balance would be through intellectual exercise. She finds a fascinating variety in the selection of books available for the prisoners during her four-year stay in the different jails of Bengal. She finds old editions of *Encyclopedia Britannica* and Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* along with books on old war strategies and horticulture. In the Presidency Jail, she finds books on Indian history and politics as well as books like Ilya Ehrenburg's *Storm* and Russell's *War Crimes in Vietnam*. She reads the books alone and sometimes with others. They talk and discuss the books, debate the various issues, and thus find reassurance in their ability to rationalize despite their unreasonable situations.

Mitra also tries to use the sharp black charcoal provided for cleaning teeth 'to draw large pictures on the wall.' She draws 'people, fields of grain, a father carrying his child on his shoulder' (84) to articulate her very human yearning for freedom.

Mitra's stay in Midnapore Jail is tolerable after a fashion but after four months, she is transferred to Baharampur Jail where she is locked up in a dark and cold cell in the part of the jail housing 'insane' prisoners. As Deepak Joshi writes in the *PUCL Bulletin* of 1982, 'How does our society treat its condemned sections? By letting them rot in jails, sometimes without trial and on other occasions by declaring them insane. There have been innumerable instances of under-trials remaining in jail for periods exceeding the maximum punishment of their alleged crimes. The explanation offered by authorities:

¹¹ The Indian Constitution contains special provisions for the welfare of women and the Supreme Court has given certain rulings about discriminatory law. To find solutions for all the problems a woman faces in her public and private life may be difficult, if not impossible, but some of the problems they encounter in day to day existence can be dealt with by the existing provisions in the criminal law, provided knowledge and the access to it is available.

loss of records in transit'.¹² There are at least a dozen women in the female ward of the Baharampur Jail who have been certified insane (22). Jamini, Jalamani, Shanta Tamangi, Budha, Bimala Bhabhi, Phulmala, Binoda are all serving life-terms for murder of their male oppressors. Some of them are mentally unstable; most of them are weak and sick. Their narratives are poignant and anguished, more so because there seem to be no way that their lot will ever change. The woman in charge of them at Baharampur Jail is called Pushpa Neiya from the poverty stricken Bada area of the Hooghly estuary called the Sunderbans, herself convicted of luring young girls into prostitution. Mitra's description of the short, dark and squat Pushpa Neiya's attitude reminds one of Big Nurse Ratched of *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Ken Kesey's memorable novel about cruel institutionalization. Neiya's method of 'controlling' the inmates is with the baton and she proudly proclaims, 'My name is Pushpa Neiya. I'll hit you so hard that you'll forget your father's name!' (23). The warders like to keep her happy because she is willing to accept the responsibility of supervising the mentally ill prisoners and also because the rations meant for the latter, like hair oil, fish, milk and sugar can be siphoned off with her help. Exposing the devastating human rights abuses and the brutalization of prisoners, the corruption and profiteering rampant in the Indian prisons, Mitra's refers to an incident that had happened at the Presidency Jail, Calcutta. She explains that for two hundred crazy prisoners in the Presidency Jail 'two barrels of milk, twenty-five pounds of bread, two pounds of butter and a pan full of sugar' was allotted, yet 'eight of the insane inmates died of starvation one cold winter' (23). There had ensued a terrible scandal. Hence, Pushpa Neiya is careful to 'keep her mad women alive to get her remission record clean' (23) by allowing them the bare minimum for subsistence.

Mitra writes of yet another incident that she learns about quite by chance from the newspaper wrapped around a small parcel that her mother had sent her. The newspaper carries a report that investigations had been ordered into the incidents that had occurred on 24th February at the Baharampur Jail. The report explains that seven prisoners had been killed by the jail authorities without any provocation. No bullets had been fired; the prisoners had been 'stabbed with bayonets till they died' (64). Desperate to learn more about the incident and thus of her companions, Mitra decides impulsively to stage a demonstration. She walks into the garden when her cell is being cleaned and refuses to return unless the Superintendent came to answer her queries. The Superintendent does not come. Instead, around two in the afternoon, all the prisoners are locked up and the Head Warder comes with fifteen guards. Mitra is beaten till she falls unconscious.

Those with long prison sentences are required to put in hard labour. For the women this generally means sweeping and cleaning the wards and the gardens, frying chick peas and grinding them to make flour, working the spindle to untangle yarn and making it ready for the looms or looking after the mentally ill inmates. Hospital duty is much sought after because it means getting fifteen days per year deducted from one's sentence. One is also paid twelve rupees and allowed to spend half of the money. The money can be used to buy items permitted by the prison but at the price quoted by the prison officials. The rest of the money is saved to be handed over at the time of release.

¹² The most recent case is that of 65 year old Patua Devi, an under-trial prisoner languishing in a Uttar Pradesh jail for 38 years, reports Amita Verma, the Lucknow correspondent of *The Deccan Chronicle* on 8th February 2006.

Since there is not much option by the way of goods to be purchased with the money earned in the prison, the prisoners at the Baharampur Jail hit upon the bright idea of purchasing wool so that Mitra can knit sweaters for them. However, when Mitra refuses to knit a sweater for a warder who has beaten up some of the inmates, the wool is taken away from them with the accusation that it was actually being used to make ropes for seditious purposes. This incident makes Mitra aware of the harsh reality that the best way to survive incarceration is to keep the warders happy. The deliberate deprivations are severe enough to break the will of any prisoner. Yet, as Mitra's narrative instantiates, there is a way to beat the system: by sharing the anguish; by making the mind a witness to the body's pain and not letting that pain paralyze the will.

The remarkable fact that gets emphasized in the cluster of experiences and events that crowd Mitra's memoir is the evidence of the unique bonding that develops among the women prisoners as a result of their sensitivity to each other's suffering and their eagerness to alleviate pain through empathy.

Inexpressible Trauma

After the rains, Mitra is transferred to the Presidency Jail in Calcutta. Among all the jails that she has lived in, what she experiences and witnesses in this jail is terrifyingly inhuman. She gradually learns about the prevailing conditions and documents incidents [especially between pages 72 and 156] of such cruelty and suffering perpetrated by human beings upon unfortunate fellow human beings, that they will leave no reader unaffected. The description is especially disturbing because it is not the fictive product of a feverish imagination of a twentieth century Marquis de Sade. It is claimed to be a factual record of the system of imprisonment and the conditions of incarceration that prevail in the prisons of the country. Maltreatment of prisoners is common enough throughout India. In Kerala, for example, every male convict entering prison must face the ordeal of 'jail call'. Immediately on arrival, the prisoner is told to bend down, after which a few heavy blows are delivered, causing serious pain along the length of the victim's spine, and making the inmate's cries of pain reverberate through the prison as warning against possible misdemeanor and as a proclamation of the power the jail officials wield. This is 'jail call'. While female inmates do not get this treatment, they often suffer continuous ill treatment and worse ignominy throughout custody, which could include sexual harassment and rape.

The emotional tension of Mitra's narrative spirals as she delves deeper into the darkness of the human soul. She protests vehemently against the injustice and ill treatment of the prisoners and persists in her attempts to share and by so doing, alleviate to some extent, the pain and anguish of her fellow inmates. Her efforts get invariably circumscribed. She is punished for her activism and is kept in isolation. Often, she is forced to remain a desperate and helpless witness to atrocities that make her think of Auschwitz.

According to a survey carried out in 1991-92, there are 1155 prisons in India which are categorized as Central Jails (86), District Jails (252), Sub Jails (718), Borstal Institutions / Juvenile Jails (21), open Jails/Camps/Farms (21), and some specialized Institutions (46). There are also eleven Women's Jails in the country. Mitra notes that in the Presidency Jail as a 'B' type jail meant generally for under-trial cases, there is a daily flux of prisoners. Here, the political detainees are kept separate from the other prisoners,

but there are times during the day when all can meet; for instance, during bath and exercise sessions, or when the wards are being cleaned, or at meal times. The political detainees are generally treated with suspicion by the jail officials since most of them are educated and belong to the middle-class, unlike the criminal offenders who belong mostly to the poorer classes, and are ignorant and illiterate.

As in the other jails, Mitra tries to establish rapport with the prisoners; not with any arrogance of a champion or a hero, but with the spirit of active interest, in an effort to build a sense of solidarity and community feeling transcending class and conditions of being, to agitate against injustices of any sort. Soon she becomes familiar with most of the inmates of the female ward of the Presidency Jail but discovers the single exception. At the end of a dark and damp corridor, Krishna is kept in solitary confinement. She is a political prisoner whose case is yet to be heard by the appointed tribunal. All are forbidden to speak with her (77-79).

As always, Mitra makes up her mind to break the rule. She picks up some shoots of fresh grass growing in the corner of the ash heap in the courtyard and approaches Krishna's cell with her bouquet. She finds,

...Darkness and a musty stench. Krishna must have just woken up. Her face looks puffy. I discovered later that sleep wasn't the only reason. The water that seeps from the floor of the cell can be somewhat contained by spreading layers of newspaper, but nothing can control the dampness. As a result Krishna's entire body was swollen all the time... (78)

Back in the ward, Mitra explains Krishna's condition to the other women. She instills in them a sense of indignation and when Krishna is allowed to come out for her bath, they tell her that she will not go back to the damp cell but will stay with them. The prisoners also refuse to sit down at the feet of the warders at lock-up time for a head count [see Commission on Human Rights Sixty-first Session on 'Deplorable conditions of detention in India']. Consequently, the warders are unable to take a head count and so they lock the prisoners up quickly. Elated by their small victory, Mitra and her friends sing spirited songs through the night. But their insubordination is not regarded lightly. The repercussion follows soon after. The next day,

... the Jailor return[s] with twenty baton wielding guards to deal with sixteen or so good-natured young girls. They wield their batons on the girls with practiced cruelty ...No one came to clean up or to give us water or food. In the evening of the next day, the Jailor arrived with a large band of guards, probably to check on the results of the baton charge. My clothes were torn to shreds – naturally at first I felt uncomfortable. But once I faced my own helplessness, I realized that they were the ones who had done this to us. If they didn't feel shame, why should we? (80-1)

As the immediate result of her 'trouble mongering', Mitra is placed in solitary confinement. She is able to see nothing from the dark cell except a sliver of the sky above

the wall and the top branches of a tree. The changing colour of the sky and of the leaves help her to gauge the passage of seasons.

There is agony and suffering for the women prisoners, many of whom do not even know clearly why and how they have landed there, as for example, a group comprising of Muslim women of all ages -- supposedly Bangladeshis but actually belonging to the state of Bihar -- who are jailed though they have committed no crime. The prisoners are not allowed to cry out loud and the slightest defiance of the rules attracts severe beatings.

Frequent visitors to the jail are those charged with prostitution. For instance, Mitra is warned 'without malice' (132) by the Welfare Officer to keep away from 'Bapi', who has syphilis. Bapi's face 'resembles a wrinkled old woman's, the rest of her body an under-developed young girl's' (130) and her life replays the age-old story of deception and exploitation. One of many children of poor parents, Bapi used to love watching romantic films that took her into multi-coloured dream worlds. When she was about seventeen, the neighbour's young cousin, who had a job with the Home Guards, became friendly with her. They went to the movies and he 'touch[ed] her, and talk[ed] of love... [one day] they exchange[d] garlands in an unofficial wedding ceremony' (131). Bapi was pleased because in the films too, the hero and the heroine behaved the same way. She spent a happy month with her husband. One day he told her that they would go for a picnic with friends. He took her to a building and asked her to wait there while he went to call his friends. Bapi waited but he did not return. A middle-aged woman arrived in the afternoon and told her to wash her face and get ready. Get ready for what, Bapi asked, and when would her husband come? She got a short and unequivocal reply: 'Why should he come back, girl? Didn't he sell you for two hundred and fifty rupees? I counted out the cash to him too!' (132). Since then, Bapi returns intermittently to the prison, which for her seems an escape from 'A hundred, two hundred, a thousand years of darkness. Days of debilitating weariness, and nights lit up and dazzling like a demon's fangs' (132). Bapi is just twenty-seven years old (132).

Who are these people who make use of natural human hopes and desires to create a perverted sense of deprivation, Mitra wonders. Why do they do this, she rages, to make girls like Bapi available in the open market? She soon realizes that the jail is an elaborate social network. Those 'who spread the nets' to catch such girls come here too. In fact, one of them is a regular visitor to the jail. Mitra writes,

\Every three or four months she appears in expensive white clothes, stays in the hospital and is visibly feted. She addresses some of the warders with unusual familiarity. Owner of a flourishing business in flesh trade she looks highly respectable...Her movements are smooth like a snake's, and her manners reflect the same detachment you find in a crocodile... (134).

The prison serves as the woman's hunting ground because it houses the victims of rape. The rapists are generally found innocent by the courts of law and are absolved of all charges. Rape is difficult to prove since the woman, unable to bear the ignominy of public description of the criminal act, falls silent [rape cases are also sensationalized by the media and invite voyeuristic interest]. The courts acquit the perpetrators and send to prison the successfully silenced victims like Anita, Noorjehan, Sarala, Preeti, Neermaya,

Tushi -- attacked at two in the afternoon, ten at night, seven in the evening – still vulnerable and carrying in their minds the indelible marks of violence. Very often they are bailed out by the brothel owners and are thus trapped into bearing forever the marks of further violence upon their bodies.

A section of every prison is set aside for the mentally unbalanced prisoners. Some of them are supposed to have killed people. Presidency Jail too has its number of ‘insane’ prisoners. Mitra regrets that she does not have a pen to ‘describe the state inside that mad house’ (109). Cages like those in the zoo, house inmates who are tied by chains embedded in the walls. Rice and vegetables do not come in plates into these cages [what if they hurt themselves or each other with the metal plates?], but are thrown on the floor and the ‘inmates must scramble for them’ (109). They are naked bodies here [what if they use the clothes to hang themselves?]. They get no blankets in the winter. It is recounted how once when a few blankets were thrown in, they fought among themselves and tore the blankets to pieces (109). May be they do not have enough sense to feel the cold, Mitra wonders? But, she notes that the jail records that ‘every year in the female ward of Presidency Jail, twelve to fourteen inmates die of “natural causes”’ (110).

Mukul is considered a ‘criminal lunatic’ (108). ‘But we have always found her quiet and harmless,’ writes Mitra. No one can say since when Mukul has lived in that ‘black hole of a cell’ (108). She sings in a thin voice all day long and the only line of her song that can be understood is ‘I cut the prince in pieces and laid him down’ (109). Suddenly she starts crying for water. Sounds of conversation and laughter can be heard from the warders’ office but no one pays any attention to her. Mukul’s cries become louder and she starts banging her head against the iron bars. The other prisoners from within their locked rooms become restless and call loudly for the warders. There is no response. After some time, Mukul’s cries stop altogether. Finally, Parul comes to their door looking annoyed. She says, ‘Why are you making such a fuss? What can I do? That’s not where I’m on duty today. It’s Bijaya’s responsibility’ (110)!

On several occasions Mitra suffers the punishment meted out to stubborn prisoners. Once when she refuses to eat in protest of the ill-treatment of the inmates, she is beaten till she loses consciousness. Yet, in spite of all the brutalization she experiences, Mitra refuses to be ‘broken into obedience and servility.’ She struggles to keep her mind alive and not let her spirit fail. She stages resistance and exhorts others, especially the ‘political’ prisoners to do the same for which she is regarded as an intransigent and dangerous prisoner. She is transferred frequently to different jails to prevent her from consolidating her influence with the other prisoners. However, she succeeds very often in provoking collective defiance and although the situations are diverse, in each of the cases the women come together spontaneously, in what they perceive to be the defense of their own interests (75-82), even when their activity brings them into direct conflict with the prison’s officialdom and results in severe punishment and solitary confinement (82-90).

Recollecting the grim incidents of the Presidency Jail, Mitra is reminded of the Auschwitz prisoners. Between pages 139 to 144, she describes the horrific experience of the being witness to inhuman cruelty meted out to pregnant women who lose their babies or die during childbirth. Shyambai, for instance, is framed of petty crimes by her patron’s family after the man’s death. She is heavily pregnant when she is lodged in the jail hospital pending her court hearing. When her labour pains start, the Matron’s evil assistants Shikha, Saraju and Lalmoti make her lie on a bare iron frame that had a broken

centre so as not to soil the sheets. There is no medical help or midwifery available. When the baby comes, Shyambai tries to cut the umbilical cord with a piece of bamboo shard. She is weak and exhausted. The baby slips from her hands, falls through the hole in the bed and dies. At ten in the morning, the doctor arrives, writes 'stillborn' on the baby's death certificate and releases Shyambai from the hospital. Shyambai is given bail after fifteen days (141).

'But there are other more horrifying memories of childbirth still alive in my mind, beside which Shyambai pales into insignificance,' writes Mitra (140). A mentally unbalanced girl is picked up from the streets and deposited in the prison hospital for 'safe custody.' Mitra and the other prisoners watch her from their cells:

[The girl] sits with her head bowed, her huge belly hanging downwards, her legs spread on either side. Her pregnancy is almost full term. ...(142)

The warders call her into the wards at lock-up time but she does not respond. It is not even clear whether she hears or understands. Shikha approaches the girl and kicks her hard. The girl rolls in the ground. Lalmoti and Dhondi join their leader. They kick and jump on the girl and drag her by the hair into the ward (143). Then,

It's ten in the night... Suddenly the near silence of the night is shattered to pieces by a dreadful inhuman scream. Once... twice... and then it just continues. At first the sheer terror makes me stand up. Then I understand. I keep standing...(144)

One of the friendlier warders whom the prisoners call Badi Didi [elder sister] explains the situation. To punish the poor senseless girl for disobedience, the Matron has ordered her to be shackled. So,

she is lying on the floor, with her shackled legs tied to the bars about a foot above the ground. In that position the baby can't come out. The mother's deathly screams only rend the silence of the night.... (144)

How does the world bear such evil? Mitra continues poignantly,

The sky doesn't break asunder The earth doesn't crack open and devour those other bearers of children who sit ten feet away, savouring mutton curry and rice meant for the patients.... Only our palms become bloodless our hands stop feeling, as we continue to grip the bars of our cells... Long after that the doctor comes and leaves again. The silent corpse, no longer in shackles, is carried out in a stretcher...(144)

If reading about such incidents disturbs the reader's mind, one can surely imagine Mitra's desperation in being in close proximity yet unable to help. She says that she has

no answer when people ask her, 'Did they give you a hard time in jail? Did they torture you?' (141).

Forgotten Selves

Four years—but for Mitra, it is a life-time spent in grasping the “truths” about human nature. Then,

... when it was all over and peace returned and the green grass grew
once more on the burnt earth, the ones who came outside the prison
walls wrote about the zone of darkness – memories of torture,
of inhumanity, of carnage, and relentless horror. (vii)

According to Barbara Harlow (1986), women's prison writings from different developing countries recording their experiences of struggle and defiance under repressive conditions, taken collectively, mark the 'emergence of a new literary corpus out of the contemporary conditions in the Third World' (506). She claims that such a corpus challenges the western literary, critical and feminist developments in two simultaneous ways. First of all, generically, she argues, such writings 'defy traditional categories and distinctions and combines fictional forms with documentary records' (503). Second, the 'collective experience and the political development that they [these women] describe emerge out of their position within a set of social relations, giving rise to a secular ideology, one not based on bonds of gender, race or ethnicity – which may be shared by men and may not be shared by women' (503).

Killing Days is several kinds of text at once: it is history, social critique, ethnography, literature, political testimony – providing many ways to understand the 'truths' of experience by recounting lives of pain and persecution. Mitra realizes the futility of making sense of her own life in a context that imposes senseless suffering on the less fortunate women. She makes a powerful case for legal literacy and political awareness. She finds most of the women helpless and unable to extricate themselves because they have no access to the law. As a pro-life activist text, *Killing Days* compels attention to a sorely neglected subject. It is an important text because it presents and tries to interpret women's experiences in exceptional circumstances. It constitutes an articulation of the unvoiced, a recovery of forgotten selves. A paraphrase of the often-cited remark by Marx may illuminate this claim: Women make their own lives (and life histories), but they do so under conditions not of their own choosing.

Finally, with the change of the political administration in the state of Bengal, the 'political detainees' are set free.

...But what happened to those who were behind the
prison walls long before, and who are still there today? (vii)

Indeed, hapless and abject women continue to suffer in inhuman conditions. Yet, while the body remains confined, the spirit seeks escape. Mitra identifies her own situation with the collective needs and interests of the other women prisoners as she understands them. When cruelty is the norm and systemic corruption effaces all traces of human and civic rights, only indomitable spirit can survive the body's defeat. Mitra's memoir is the testimony of a woman's will to overcome her physical circumstances. She remembers how in the 'midst of hell' she finds courage and love and sees life 'rise undaunted from

the ashes of death' (viii). These memories, she says, sustain her in times of adversity—which have been many in the later years. She recalls,

People have often asked me: 'What good did it do, wasting so many years of your life?' I don't know what they mean by 'waste'. I only know that if these years were taken away from my life, I would never fully grasp the significance of what is 'human'. (viii).

Killing Days is a humbling and an ennobling text. It allows the stifled narratives of many anonymous anguished women to find release.

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